



Walter Isaacson

Self-Evident Truths

OPENING THE CONVERSATION

1. Isaacson explores the phrase “self-evident truths” and the bold claim that “all men are created equal.” What stood out most to you in how he frames these ideas?
2. What question or tension from the essay stayed with you after reading?

CLOSE READING AND INTERPRETATION

3. Isaacson notes that calling equality “self-evident” was not obvious at the time, but deeply controversial. Why was this claim so radical in 1776?
4. How does the essay use early reactions—from Loyalist critics to readers in Britain and America—to show how the Declaration was received?
5. What role did early readers—such as ministers, writers, and ordinary citizens—play in interpreting and elevating the “self-evident truths”?

EXPLORING TENSIONS

6. How did critics at the time challenge the Declaration’s claims, especially in light of slavery and inequality?
7. Isaacson highlights that these questions were asked in 1776, not just later. How does that change the way we think about the founding moment?

REFLECTION AND APPLICATION

8. The essay suggests that the meaning of the Declaration was shaped not only by its authors, but by generations of readers. What does it mean for a document’s meaning to evolve in this way?
9. Where do you see individuals or movements today drawing on founding ideals to push for change?

CLOSING REFLECTION

10. Isaacson shows that the “self-evident truths” became central to American identity over time. What does this suggest about how principles become lived realities?